

Epiphany 3 2021
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10
1 Corinthians 12.12-31a
Luke 4.14-21

Here in the northern hemisphere, the octave from the 18th to 25th of January is a period of prayer for Christian unity, now coordinated by the World Council of Churches, the world's largest ecumenical body.

Our New Testament lesson this morning is a nod to this, though the functional analogy is a problematic one, more on which later. This is, in any case, a good occasion for us to consider the nature of Church, especially in light of our manifest *disunity*: there are about 350 member churches of the World Council, and many many more non-members. Since the Reformation, Protestants in particular have been very busy splitting up.

+++

For many people—perhaps even most people—*this* is the Church: the local worshipping community, who meet Sunday by Sunday, and try every day to live lives worthy of our baptisms, through love of neighbour, stranger, and even foe.

And there is an important truth to acknowledge here, which is that the Church is a *concrete* thing, and not

just an abstraction: which is to say that the presence of God is tangible, as real as stone and timber, as flesh and bone, as bread and wine. *You* are the body of Christ, and individually members of it: and St Paul does mean you, sitting in your pews, and departing from this place into your daily lives. You are the Body of Christ, and me too.

And I suppose we could stop there, stop here at the parish church, and with the individual Christians who make it up. Plenty of people do: this is the theory of the Church held by Baptists and Presbyterians, for example. They have national and international associations too, but these are incidental, as it were: negotiable, and not a matter of essence or nature.

But the Church of England did not move in this congregationalist direction like other Protestant groups did. We retained a sense—shared by our Catholic forebears and Eastern Orthodox cousins—that this here gathering of Christians is a proper part of something else; and indeed that the Church—with a capital C—is not in the first place a collection of human beings who meet in a collection of buildings or, for that matter, out of them, who share some ideology, or particular affection for Jesus of Nazareth, a bit like a fan club.

No: the Church is the Body of Christ, and we—you—are that Body, but it is of course first and principally *his* Body, into whom we have been baptised and of whom we feed in the eucharist. The Church, in other

words, is where the divine and the human are immersed into one another, united like food is incorporated into flesh, water mingled into wine.

Which is to say that the Church is *mystical* as well as concrete, a mystery beyond telling, as well as mundane. This is and has always been the great glory of the Christian faith: our insistence that the immanent and transcendent are not in opposition, but quite on the contrary, are found in the same place. Bread and wine; church buildings and individual Christians; we are greater than the sum of our parts, signifying nothing other than the living God.

+++

Tragically, ecumenical conversation is rarely conducted on this register. Even those among us who are quite keen on improving relations between churches, say that surely, surely, we should be able to join or re-join one another, seeing as our beliefs are so similar, or even our practices. Do we not have the same Bibles? Do we not recite the same Creed? Do we not sing one another's hymns?

But conformity does not precede unity, as if it is we who have forged our unity, and not Christ, who gathered us into himself to whom we are to be conformed rather than to each other, all of us—Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants, all 350 of us, or more.

Which is to say that we are united already; already one Body by the grace of God, whose patience in the face of our petty squabbles is nothing short of miraculous. Our prayers for Christian unity are therefore not prayers for us to become one, but rather prayers for us to see that we already are, and to behave accordingly.

This is, by the way, why in this Benefice we pray—from time to time—for Pope Francis alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, and for Bartholomew the Ecumenical Patriarch, and for the leaders of the free and Reformed churches. We are by so praying acknowledging our unity in Christ, and hoping for this reality to be made manifest.

+++

But if we are already united, you may well ask why we should bother praying for and working towards more *visible* unity.

And the standard answer given is a pragmatic one, and with biblical justification from passages like the one we have just heard from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We need each other to function properly, to achieve whatever end it is that we want to achieve, whether it is the spread of the gospel, the betterment of humanity, or some other such lofty goal.

But this too misses the point, which is simply that if it is true that we *are* one Body of Christ, then we ought

to *be* one Body of Christ. The truth is its own justification, its own motivation for us to reach out across the ridiculous lines we have drawn between, of all things, churches.

That the Church continues to live with its own disunity is and to ought to feel like a scandal, and for the sake of what?: minor theological disagreements, liturgical preferences, personality clashes. Or worse, lust for power, and insecurity over property and other material wealth. God help us to get our priorities straight.

+++

You know what? It occurs to me that rural parishes have a lot to teach us about ecumenism. We come here to this church because it is ours; it is where we belong. We don't pick and choose our church, just as we don't pick and chose our families: or indeed our bodies, though we may try to change them one way or another.

In cities, almost everyone goes where they like, in much the same way they go to their preferred shops or restaurants. A church is a product, to be evaluated by our own personal preferences as consumers, which are of course infallible, the customer being always right, after all. Perhaps it is no wonder then that the Church is a fractured as it is, and remains so: market segmentation comes for us all.

There is a downside to parochialism, of course: and it still amuses me how some people would rather not go to church at all than to drive six minutes to the next parish, so reluctant they are to leave their villages. But there is a virtue in this too, an important resistance against consumerist culture. So, having briefly considered the mystical nature of the Church as Christ's Body, we quickly find ourselves back here, talking about the parish church. And this is fitting, I suppose, and it gives us a clue about what to pray for throughout this week of prayer for Christian unity. It is all well and good to pray for the Archbishop and the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch. But this week let us pray for local churches, whatever their denominations, and that they may enjoy the support of those living in their midst. And may we all set aside our prejudices and preferences in pursuit of the truth of our unity as Christ's body.